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Wicked Horses:
Women's Will in Harley 2253

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Wicked Horses:
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Dedication

This report is dedicated to every teacher I've ever loved, including but not limited to my kindergarten teacher Aleta Walker, my high school English teacher Suzanne Kelley, my fearless undergraduate advisors, Peter Platt at Barnard College and Paul Strohm at Columbia University, and my tireless readers and mentors, Daniel Birkholz and Elizabeth Scala.

Abstract

Wicked Horses:
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British Library MS Harley 2253 is a unique fourteenth-century miscellany consisting of 140 folios and containing 116 different texts, including lyrics, political poems, fabliaux and other secular and religious texts in verse and prose, Latin, Middle English and Anglo-Norman. While the so-called "Harley Lyrics" popularized by Brook's edition may have registered widely on scholarly radar, many of the non-English texts in the collection have failed to elicit critical attention. However, these texts are vital points in the narrative of English literary history. In particular, the four Anglo-Norman fabliaux included in Harley 2253 constitute a majority of the extant pre-Chaucerian fabliaux produced on the English isles, and of these, *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Du Chevalier a La Corbeille* have no Old French analogues. This report explores the Anglo-Norman fabliaux in this manuscript, their relationship to the continental French tradition and to the subsequent English (ie. Chaucerian) fabliaux incarnations. Specifically, I argue that representations

of female desire – figured as an opposition between "stillness" and doing one's "will" – surface in these obscene misogynist stories that simultaneously objectify and colonize the female body. "De Clerico et Puella", *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler* all include an unmarried female who articulates her sexual desire freely, a sharp contrast to the traditional cuckoldry plot of Old French fabliaux which revolves around a married woman's illicit affairs. Indeed, the grotesque images of sexual violence and the pornographic images of sexual fulfillment in these pre-Chaucerian fabliaux are not contained by the ecclesiastic context from which these texts originate, but rather they linger and are transformed by the female characters, patrons, readers and hearers of the medieval manuscripts in their domestic contexts.

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WICKED HORSES: WOMEN'S WILL IN HARLEY 2253

Le Dit de la Gageure ("The Tale of the Wager") is an Anglo-Norman fabliau extant in only one manuscript, the Herefordshire miscellany, British Library Harley 2253.[1] The Tale of the Wager is a 108-line poem in rhyming couplets, which begins as an amorous story about two young lovers. When a chambermaid of a noble household gets propositioned by a squire in the family, the young woman approaches the lady of the house, a very beautiful wife ("une tresbele femme"), for advice about how to proceed. This lady does not like her husband's family ("n'amoit pas soun lygnage"), and she uses this opportunity to scheme a way to shame the squire (and, by extension, her husband and his family). Her suggestion to the chambermaid, therefore, is that the squire should prove his love to her by kissing ("beiser") the chambermaid's ass ("cul") in the garden ("en cel jardyn") at an appointed time. The squire agrees, and the lady gleefully reports this shameful news to her husband. She wages that the squire will kiss the girl's ass or else the lady herself will forfeit a cask of wine ("le tonel de vyn").

As the arranged rendezvous approaches, the lady and her husband position themselves above the garden to view the scene from the window. Much to the lady's (and the chambermaid's) surprise, just as the squire raises up the chambermaid's skirt in the back ("leve susles dras dere"), instead of kissing her ass, he takes out a good instrument "bon bordoun" and gives it to her in the middle of her cunt ("coun"):

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[1] For a facsimile of the manuscript, see N.R. Ker, *Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253* (London: EETS, 1965). For an English translation of the Anglo-Norman fabliau, see Thomas Kennedy, *Anglo-Norman Poems about Love, Women and Sex* (New York: Columbia University PhD Dissertations, 1973). Subsequent quotations of *Le Dit de la Gageure* and the other Anglo-Norman fabliau in the Harley manuscript will come from this edition.

Yl sake auant bon bordoun,
Si l'a donne en my le coun;
Un gros vit long e quarre,
Si ly a en my le coun done.

[He draws out a good instrument,
And gives it to her in the middle of her cunt;
A big prick, long and strong,
Thus in the middle of the cunt he gave it to her.]

The squire restrains her arms so that she cannot turn, "ne poetit gwenchir." The lady watching from above shouts out to her chambermaid to twist loose, calling her maid a traitoress and a whore ("Gwenchez trestresse gwenchez puteyne!"). The lady's husband demands that the chambermaid hold still, laughing and congratulating the squire with a new horse:

E ly sire ly dist en riaunt
Tien tei leres ie te comaunt!
Frapez la bien e vistement
Ie te comaunt hardiement
De lower averez par seint Thomas
Un cheval q vaudra dis mars!

[And the lord said to her laughing
'Hold still, thief, I command you!
Knock her well and quickly
I command you boldly!
For payment you will have, by St. Thomas
A horse that will be worth ten marks!]

Thus the scene of ass-kissing that the wife staged veers astray and results in her loss of the bet against her husband's family's reputation. Whereas this tale begins with the possibility of an inversion of the husband's authority within the household, in the end he wins the wager and marries his brother the squire to the chambermaid ("prodhome fist son frere / esposer cele chaunbrere"). The narrator assures us that the lady honored her

husband's loved ones from then on, claiming that there is no more to say about the chambermaid and the squire. But surely this is not all to the story of this unique text in its unique manuscript.

While it is true that this story did not flourish in popularity, its existence nevertheless begs many questions relevant to medieval studies, English studies, and women's and gender studies, which I will address in what follows. The early fourteenth-century, tri-lingual manuscript, in which *Le Dit de la Gageure* is included, has received critical attention in recent years.[2] The unique miscellany consists of 140 folios and 116 different texts in Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English, including secular and religious texts of various genres: romance, lyric, prayers, debate poems and fabliau. While the so-called "Harley Lyrics" popularized by G.L. Brook's edition may have registered widely on scholarly radar, many of the non-English texts in the collection have failed to elicit critical attention.[3] However, I would argue that these texts are vital points in the narrative of English literary history. In particular, the four Anglo-Norman fabliau included in Harley 2253 constitute a majority of the extant pre-Chaucerian fabliau produced on the English isles, and of these, *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Du Chevalier a La Corbeille* have no Old French analogues. Thus, our first task will be to place these unique texts in their unique manuscript context.

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[2] See especially Susanna Fein's edition, *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: the Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2000). Furthermore, Carter Revard's work on the Harley manuscript and its scribe has been formative to the critical discourse.

[3] G.L. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics: the Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley 2253* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1968).

In the section of this paper called "Women's and gender studies and Harley 2253," I will argue that the manuscript is particularly focused on women's issues and women readers, as we can see from the representation of women and female sexuality in *Le Dit de la Gageure*. The first text that the so-called Harley scribe records in this collection is an *ABC a femmes*, which establishes the discourse on women as a theme that will pervade the remainder of the manuscript, as well as suggests a female readership, a point to which we will return in the last section. Furthermore, the manuscript includes entries "for" and "against" women, an organizing principle of the manuscript that Carter Revard describes as *contrefacto*.[4] Finally, women's bodies, desires, and sexualities are explicitly presented in various performance poems in which female characters speak, in addition to the fabliaux which obscenely reference the female body and various sex acts.

After addressing the manuscript context of *Le Dit de la Gageure*, I will look to the continental French critical tradition to see how it helps illuminate the insular Anglo-Norman fabliaux and their representations of sexuality. The next section, "Worse than a brown nose: the stakes of the cun/cul conflation," explores the Old French fabliau tradition and its handling of female genitalia in order to make sense of the curious ass-kissing wager in *Le Dit de la Gageure*. In E. Jane Burns' *Bodytalk*, she suggests that the penis-eye of the fabliau gaze conflates cun/cul, which I will build upon to make my claim

[4] See Carter Revard, "Oppositional Thematics and Metanarrative in MS Harley 2253, Quires 1-6," *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, Ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007). 95-112.

that the lady's wager depends on the squire not kissing cul, but kissing cun.[5] I will endeavor to answer the following question: If it is not an excrement taboo or the humiliation of kissing any nether region in general, what is particularly shameful (for the squire), or potentially liberating (for the chambermaid and the lady) about a cun-kissing wager? I will also show how Chaucer later employs a similar nether-kissing scene to exploit this cun/cul conflation and more explicitly pursues the homoerotic tones of the kiss as well in the *Miller's Tale*.[6]

However, *Le Dit de la Gageure* differs from the Old French fabliau tradition as well. Instead of the fabliau's generic stereotype of the adulterous erotic triangle, it represents a sexual dyad formed between unmarried heterosexual pairs. Rather than being a moral tale about a cuckolded husband, in *Le Dit de la Gageure* the married woman exploits the unmarried woman's sexuality in an effort to shame her husband. But how are we to understand her response as she watches the turn of events unfold in the garden below her, imploring the chambermaid to "gwynchez" and calling her a traitoress and a whore? To whom is the chambermaid being disloyal, and what makes the actual sex act (in the lady's opinion) more reprehensible than the potential kiss? While the lady in *Le Dit de la Gageure* exhorts the chambermaid to twist, her husband commands the girl to "be still." As I will show in this section called "Twist and shout, or the "still/wille" dichotomy," *Le Dit de la Gageure* (as well as two other Anglo-Norman

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[5] E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Pres, 1993).

[6] For all Chaucerian references, I will be quoting from Larry Benson's edition, *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

fabliau in the Harley manuscript, *Du Chevalier a La Corbeille* and *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler*) represents the choice for female sexuality as one between "stillness" and restraint on the one hand, or desire and frenetic escape on the other.

Laughing, the male head of household rewards the squire with a horse for his sexual prowess, raising his social status in the process and marrying him off to the chambermaid in the end of *Le Dit de la Gageure*. As Karma Lochrie and Nicole Sidhu have convincingly detailed, fabliau politics represent a gendered world with complicated power structures and systems of exchange.[7] Additionally scholars have persuasively documented that class interests in the plot of the fabliau often align with the aristocratic interests of romance readers and patrons, who alternately mock or endorse the behavior and/or events that they witness in the stories. So while the voyeuristic, classist and misogynist laughter of *Le Dit de la Gageure* cannot be denied, for a moment at least the text imagines the possibility of an alternate ending, critiquing or at least portraying ambivalence about precisely these aristocratic and patriarchal social mores. In the end of the tale, the narrator reframes it as the story of "the squire and the chambermaid," rather than of the seemingly victorious head of the household. While *Le Dit de la Gageure* leaves the story of this new, semi-noble family formed by the marriage of the squire (with his new horse) to his new wife, presumably no longer the chambermaid, for another day, we are still left asking, "are we laughing with the man of the household or at him?" which provides the title of my fourth section in this paper. Similarly, or perhaps more

[7] Karma Lochrie, "Women's 'Pryvetees' and Fabliau Politics in *The Miller's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994) and Nicole Sidhu, "'To Late for to Crie': Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 21.1 (2009).

explicitly, Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* problematizes the power structure within the patriarchal household, as Symkyn's unmarried daughter schemes with the young male visitor to her house, giving him her father's stolen flour and her virginal flower. Where *Le Dit de la Gageure* may inconclusively answer the question about who is laughing at whom, the *Reeve's Tale* makes the potential sexual and social ramifications of the wager more apparent.

Another nagging similarity between *Le Dit de la Gageure* and Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* is the significance of a horse to each story. My next section, "'Wehee' is for horses," addresses the idiosyncratic inclusion of equine imagery in the Harley manuscript and investigates the relevance of the figure of the horse to issues of the body, desire and sexuality. In *Le Dit de la Gageure*, the squire receives a horse worth ten marks (a very particular price that we will see again in *De Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler*) in exchange for performing feats of sexual prowess in the garden, while the horses' running "wehee" after the mares in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* provides Symkym's cover to steal from the clerks. Another Harley text, "De Clerico et Puella," compares female sexuality to riding a "wicked horse," and I will explore this metaphor as a as a recurrent figure in the scenes of female sexuality in the Harley 2253 manuscript. Horses appear in the bestiary, bestiare d'amour, romance, fable, and beast literature traditions, and serve as apt images of animal passion, sexuality and control. Latin bestiaries, from which Pierre de Beavais composed his 13th-century French translation, claimed that a horse's worth

depends upon the ease with which it can be restrained "when haste is called for" (158).[8] Often coded as faithful vassals in the Latin and French bestiaries and in the romance tradition, good horses maintain their fealty to their lords despite such obstacles as the lord's absence or any offers to change allegiance.[9] As the agricultural and military fourteenth-century culture would recognize, the horses, like the women, exist in a confined space between restraint and desire.

As I will show, however, the Harley manuscript takes care to represent various assertions of women's will, both sexual and literary. While the texts within the manuscript illustrate the theme of women's patronage, the manuscript itself exists as an artifact of women's patronage and readership. In both *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler*, the young women in the stories have a sexual encounter while the older women lose a bet; the loss to these wives results in a social (and monetary) gain for the squire and the knight in the story, who are supported by these gains. As June Hall McCash suggests, this theme of female patronage within narratives often coincides with female patronage of the narrative or manuscript itself.[10] Thus, I ask in the last section of this paper, "Female patronage and performance," if a woman heard or read or performed or paid for this book, how might they have read it? My paper

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[8] Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006).

[9] See *Bevis of Hampton* when Arondel throws off any rider other than Bevis, even if he will be fettered as a result. See also the Latin second-family bestiary: "Some will accept on their backs none but the master" (Clark 157).

[10] June Hall McCash, *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) and "The Role of Women in the Rise of the Vernacular," *Comparative Literature* 60.1 (2008).

ultimately suggests that it is possible to hear unique or idiosyncratic voices speaking out from the patriarchal medieval past. While my methodology might be accused of being willful or optimistic, I hope that a scholar in the future will be willing to read past the current tone of recent political discussions regarding female sexuality, birth control and bodily integrity to hear at least one female's expression of her body and sexuality, if she exists.

Women's and gender studies and Harley 2253

Critics studying the Harley 2253 manuscript have found it full of women's issues and concerns in various guises. In his investigation of the manuscript's organizational principles, Carter Revard remarks that "the scribe's very first text identifies women as an important part of his chosen audience" (104).[11] From the very first text the scribe includes in this miscellany, an *ABC a femmes*, he marks a female audience when he writes, "I will make for women an ABC" [Revard's translation]. In her discussion of the French secular verse in the manuscript, Mary Dove counts thirteen items that belong to the discourse of "what women are like," including French, English and Latin texts of various genres in Harley 2253.[12] Both Dove and Revard find compelling examples of the *contrefacto* and *propretes des femmes* traditions in specific texts from the manuscript, as

[11] See "Oppositional Thematics and Metanarrative in MS Harley 2253, Quires 1-6", *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, Ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007).

[12] Dove lists the following poems in the *propretes des femmes* tradition: *ABC a femmes, Le Dit des femmes, Le Blasme des femmes, De la femme et de la pie, De conjuge non ducenda, Gilote et Johane, Urbain le courtois, On the Follies of Fashion, The Poet's Repentance, The Meeting in the Wood, Advice to Women, Hending*, and John of Wales's *Communeloquium*. See "Evading Textual Intimacy: The French Secular Verse" in Fein's *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*.

well as in the general organization principle of the Harley scribe's compilation. Other critics have included even more of the manuscript contents in accounts of such female-interested literature. For instance, Barbara Nolan adds *The Way of Women's Love* and the four Anglo-Norman fabliaux as examples of texts addressing the "fraught problem of women" in Harley 2253 (295).[13]

In addition to the texts about women, there are texts in this manuscript in which female speakers participate in a dialogue, debate, interlude, or as ventriloquized voices in fabliaux. In his article on "Debate Verse" in the Harley manuscript, Karl Reichl provides a helpful conceptual category with which to group the secular, dramatic poems that form the object of this study.[14] Debates, according to his definition, encompass any "dialogue between two (or more) persons (including personifications and animals) on some issue (or issues) for which one speaker's position is opposed by the other speaker (or speakers)" (228). While the speakers vary from ardent lover and hesitant maiden to experienced tutor and virginal student to empowered knight and bewitched mare's vagina, the dialogic model of position and opposition works well as a description of many of these multi-vocal texts in the Harley manuscript. While Nolan argues that these ribaldries were reserved for silent, clerical, anti-feminist study, the layout and dramatic cues of some of the other unique texts in this "women's group" indicate that they were intended for performance and oral recitation. As Revard explains, "the scribe has set

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[13] Nolan, "Anthologizing Ribaldry: Five Anglo-Norman Fabliaux" in Fein's *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 289-328.

[14] See Reichl, "Debate Verse" in Fein's *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, 219-240.

paragraph-marks and capital letters to identify and mark speakers in the dialogue or debate portions: *G, J, VX* for *Gilote, Johane, Vxor*" (126).[15] I expand his term "performance-poem" to describe all the debate-dialogue poems of Harley 2253 in which women's perspectives are dramatized.[16] Thus, whether one calls them debates or performance poems, the texts in Harley 2253 articulate various female desires and their oppositions, as well as highlight the embodied nature of this discourse through its performativity.

Despite the clerical and/or antifeminist agenda of the various texts in the manuscript, the existence of which is not surprising considering the long-standing tradition of *blasmes des femmes* and *querelle des femmes* debate literature, the feminine voices that speak, often in dialogic form, produce *in toto* a compelling set of recursive features and topics. For all their parodic intent and stereotypical attitudes we see representations of tensions between women's sexual desires and their loyalties to their families, between their will and their husband's authority, and between generations and classes of women, suggesting a set of underlying feminine concerns and interests. As Burns argues in the context of the Old French literary tradition,

> simply by speaking, these female protagonists suggest what might happen if women had thinking heads… we can hear these voices couched within some of the most misogynistic portraits of wives, mothers, and

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[15] See "*Gilote et Johane*: an Interlude in B.L. MS Harley 2253," *SP* 79 (1982): 126. Letters and paragraph-marks appear at lines 115, 141, 185, 187, 193, 203, 260, 270, and 319. Interestingly, Revard notes, "the marks at 203 and 319 are not beside dialogue, but show where the Narrator takes over from the debators."

[16] For more on the term "performance-poem," see Carter Revard, "The Wife of Bath's Grandmother: or, How Gilote Showed Her Friend Johane That the Wages of Sin is Worldly Pleasure, and How Both Then Preached this Gospel Throughout England and Ireland," *Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 118.

> sweethearts… if we… choose to decipher female 'talk'… as more than 'mouthsound,' or more than a thorough ventriloquizing of the male author's hegemonic control, we can begin to hear how the voices of female protagonists emit, however faintly or intermittently, a resistence to the pat medieval distinction between knowledge and pleasure.[17] (103)

Rather than assuming that women's voices articulated through the medium of a male author and scribe must be necessarily or solely anti-feminist, and rather than hearing these voices simply as negative examples of transgressive femininity, I propose that we include this fourteenth-century manuscript in our narrative of the history of female sexuality to see what it has to offer.

Worse than a brown nose: the stakes of the cun/cul conflation

Le Dit de la Gageure explores the dramatic tension between a wife who dislikes her husband's family ("n'amoit pas soun lygnage") and the structures of authority within her household. The close family ties are foregrounded and compounded by the feudal relationships in this fabliau. The knight ("chevaler") and the squire are brothers. The lady's chambermaid ("chaunbrere") is also her relative ("cosyne"). So, when the presumably younger and sexually inexperienced female seeks the advice of the older wife in the tale, the lady of the house is interested in establishing an alternative structure of authority for her chaunbrere, one in which the woman's desires are on top, as it were. She advises the maid ("la pucele") to test the squire and, by extension, her husband's power and his family's reputation. Since the lady of the house dislikes the patriarchal line, she desires to subvert his powerful position, to have his squire kiss the ass of her

[17] E. Jane Burns, "Knowing Women: Female Orifices in Old French Farce and Fabliau," *Exemplaria* 4.1 (1992): 81-104.

lady in waiting ("beyser le cul ma chaunbrere"). If we take seriously Burns' observation that "the confusion of female *con* and *cul* is standard fare in Old French fabliau… replacing the vagina with a roughly analogous male orifice," then the crux of the wager is not merely a farcical joke about kissing ass, but a potential re-invention of sexual, marital and social power dynamics in which men submit to women's desires (87).[18] This potential kiss would shame her husband, prove the squire's love for the chambermaid and win the lady's bet. Additional signification is added if we consider the act of kissing cun/cul in the reliquary or feudal context in which kisses of fealty or devotion figure prominently. To what is the lady proposing that the squire should swear fealty here?

This ambiguity is the source of the confusion and laughter in Chaucer's *Miller Tale*. In the "misdirected kiss" scene, a similar act of ass-kissing is staged. Absolon, pining away for Alison, decides that "at cokes crowe… I shal hire kisse" (3675, 3680).[19] Longing "as dooth a lamb after the tete" (3704), Absolon meets Alison "at the wyndow" (3732) where "he felte a thing al rough and long yherd" (3738).[20] Instead of the maternal breast or the amorous mouth, Absolon encounters the female genitalia, eye-to-"nether ye" (3852).[21] Alison's response is a resounding, "Tehee!" (75), and Nicolas and Alison

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[18] Burns, *Bodytalk*.

[19] For the tradition of medieval beast literature, see Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[20] Here the window scene recalls "De Clerico et Puella," a Middle English poem in the Harley MS which I consider further in section V.

[21] For a provocative argument about Absolon's Marian desire and disappointment, with significant implications about the "squeamish boy's" homosexuality, see Greg Walker, "Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in *The Miller's Tale*," *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature:*

"laughen al thy fille" (3722).[22] As a result, Absolon swears off women: "For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers, / Of paramours he sette nat a kers" (3755-56). Fulfilling his prophecy, the next potential kiss at the threshold of the window in *The Miller's Tale* is male-male in nature. However the actual kiss turns out to be the touch of a hot iron "amydde [Nicholas's] ers" (3810). Rather than kissing Absolon, Alison offers her nether region, and rather than finding lips or an ass, Absolon seems to find a vagina. When Absolon returns with a sexually suggestive hot rod, however, he gives it to Nicholas rather than to Alison. The possibility of this topsy-turvy sexual world is already present in the kissing scene in *Le Dit de la Gageure*, as is the potential threat of violence. The squire will not be accused of "kissing up" to the chambermaid, however, as he trades the possibility of a brown nose for an actual display of sexual domination.

Twist and shout, or the "still/wille" dichotomy

While the dramatic conflict in fabliaux, according to Karma Lochrie, typically comes from the outside with the threat of cuckoldry, *Le Dit de La Gageure* explores the tension within the household between husband and wife and constructs its plot around the sexual scenario between an unwed woman and a young squire.[23] When the potential kiss turns into actual violence, the wife's response to the chambermaid's plight may be

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Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts, Eds. Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (England: D.S. Brewer, 2002) 61-91.

[22] This exclamatory phrase primes the horses' "wehee" in the *Reeve's Tale*, which I investigate in section IV and V (4066).

[23] While Lochrie writes, "cuckoldry is usually considered to be one of the defining features of the fabliaux as a genre" (287), of the four Harley fabliau, only one, *Du chevalier a la corbeille,* employs cuckoldry as the narrative plot device.

surprising to modern sensibilities. Hastily the lady cries out to the chaunbrere, her "grosse voiz" combating the squire's "gros vit": Twist loose, traistress! Twist, whore! Twist or may God give you a bad end! I have lost the cask of wine! ("Gwenchez trestresse gwenchez puteyne! / Gwenchez dieu te doint malfyn! / J'ai perdu le tonel de vyn"). The lady's aggressive language toward her chambermaid is presumably not solely about her failure to maintain her chastity; she is not being chastised merely for sexual impropriety here since the initial scene staged by the lady was designed to culminate in an inarguably sexual "kiss." Instead, the lady is enraged about losing the bet with her husband and failing to assert her desire upon the marionette pair in the garden. Rather than inverting the familial power dynamics, the scene in the garden reproduces patriarchal sexual and marriage norms. The lady entreats the maid to "gwenchez," to twist, turn, squirm and strive to set herself free from the constraining sexual grasp of the squire's arms.

It will be productive here to explore briefly two other texts in the Harley MS to see their development of this connection between movement and female sexual will. Besides Harley 2253, *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cuns Parler* (The Knight Who Makes Cunts Talk) survives in at least seven other continental analogues in Old French. This tale recounts the story of a knight and his squire Huet who have "ne… rente ne terre" to their names (17). Like true romantic knights, the men wander on their way to win their honor at a tournament. Along the way, they see three ladies bathing and are rewarded (for returning the clothes Huet steals) with the gift of commanding any cul and coun they encounter to speak. The second time the coun speaks in this tale is when the knight and a

young lady agree to come together at night in the count's household. Mimicking the coun's willingness to share sexual details at the knight's "comaundement," the narrator gladly indulges in this pornographic bedroom scene, resisting any postponement, for he declares, "Why should I speak at length?" [quoi dirroi ie longement?] (169).[24] The knight asks whether the lady ("dammoisele") is a virgin ("pucele"), to which the coun responds, "No, sir, for sure, she has had more than one hundred balls at her behind that have torn up her banner" [nanyl syre certeignement, ele ad eu plus que cent coillouns a soun derere que ount purfendu sa banere] (183-6).

Finally, after hearing of the young lady's disgrace, the countess of the household puts her honor on the line and bets the knight that he will not have the same success with her. Unlike the lady of the house in *Le Dit de la Gageure*, who makes a bet to shame her husband, the countess in *Le Chevalier qui fist les Cuns Parler* bets her own honor to redeem the young lady's sexual reputation. To the knight's boast that he can make cunts speak "a mon comaundement" [at my command] (230), the countess responds that he will not be able to get an answer "a chose qe vous demaundrez" [to anything that you demand] (236). Through pure "engynez" [trickery, ingenuity] the countess conspires to gag her cunt-mouth in order to silence it. After the countess stuffs the coun with cotton, the cul "respondra a vostre vueil" [responds to the knight's wish] (26). The cul complains of being squeezed so severely that it cannot speak ("destreint si ferement / que ie ne pus apertement / une soule parole parler / taunt me fet encombrer") (263-6). And

[24] Similarly the lady in *De Clerico et Puella* shortcuts through the preliminary courting phase, acquiescing to her lover's demands, for "what bote is it to leye", this is not her first rodeo either.

once the coun has suffered from the removal of the cotton with a long hook "un long crok" (269), it too complains of having been wickedly strangled "estrangle vylement" and unable to respond (274). This seems to be the crime that the countess is punished for in the violent hook scene: she wants to stifle the reciprocal relationship of sexual demand and response that the young lady's coun articulates.

When the young lady confides in the countess about her experience in bed with the knight – "fist moun coun a ly parler" (he made my cunt speak to him) (208) -- the lady advises, "Be still, this is madness!" [Tes fet la dame c'est folye!] (213). The relationship between images of frenetic movement and orgasm suggest a possible explanation for the meaning behind this otherwise enigmatic advice to "be still." In *Le Chevalier et la Corbaille* (The Knight and the Basket), the evidence of the knight and lady's love-making is in the shaking and twisting of the blankets on the bed. If we understand "making a cunt speak" to be a metaphor for female sexual gratification, then the countess' admonition for the young lady to "be still" would represent a typical articulation of restraining female sexual desire, especially considering the young lady's unmarried status. Therefore, the countess is both vetting her own honor as well as testing the knight's cunning (and his sexual prowess) when she makes a wager that depends on her cunt's silence. She wants to close that mouth, still that voice, but ultimately the text ensures through the hook scene that female sexual desire is represented and heard, as the cunt is ultimately liberated from its fetters to commune and make peace with the knight.

The second text from Harley 2253 that meditates on the relationship between sexual will and stillness is the Middle English lyric, "De Clerico et Puella" (My deth y

loue, my lyf ich hate, for a leuedy shene), which consists of nine English mono-rhymed quatrains, and alternates dramatic speakers between a clerk and a maiden.[25] Rather than didactically preaching virginity or upholding patriarchal power dynamics, the rigorous rhetorical structure and rigid diction of the lovers' debate produces an erotic progression across the threshold into the bedroom. The clerk's argument dominates the first two stanzas before the poem alternates, debating stanza by stanza for its remainder. Furthermore, the lady's final declaration that she will submit to the clerk's propositions and "don al [his] wille" implies her acquiescence to his sexual desires as well as an acknowledgement of her socially inferior position.

However, the maiden's deployment of the language of incarceration and her mastery of linguistic strategies of empowerment allow her to gratify her sexual desires, not restrain them. While she puts up a stiff front, denying the clerk entrance to her bower for several stanzas, the maiden meets his linguistic bravado with her own rhetorical flourish. She matches his reference to her as "dayes light" with the injunction that he will "never live that day" that she submits to him. While he bemoans his fate that he is at the whims of a lady who "bindeth" and "awey caste" his desires, in charge of his very life and death, she responds that the death of execution, not orgasm, awaits him in her bower. But there is the rub. Apparently, the vertical threshold has already been approached, as

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[25] Reichl describes the slippery task of classifying *De Clerico et Puella* as both *pastourelle* and not-*pastourelle*: "it lacks both the frame-story (the *chanson d'aventure* introduction) and the usual protagonists, knight and shepherdess," but "it shares with the *pastourelle*, however, the seduction dialogue between man and woman" (235). The more typical example of *pastourelle* is found in *The Meeting in the Wood*, "with a knight chancing to meet a beautiful shepherdess, with whom he falls in love and whom he tries to seduce, sometimes, but by no means always, with success" (Reichl 233). See also Geri L. Smith, *The Medieval French Pastourelle Tradition: Poetic Motivations and Generic Transformations* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

the clerk reminds her, “In a window ther we stod we custe us fifty sithe.” But it is the threat of being “itake” in the bower, of being found out, by the patriarchal figures of her “fader an al my kynne” that hinders the performance of the woman’s (horizontal) desires. Unsatisfied with the gender dynamics that diminish her sexual freedom, she insists that “fader, moder, and all my kun ne shall me holde so stille.” Despite its use here to mean “restrain,” the more intimate meaning of the verb “to hold” resonates as she consents to the clerk’s entreaties to cross the threshold into the bower. The maiden claims that her family cannot prevent her from allowing the clerk into her bower, nor can they prevent her from quivering in orgasm with him.

Laughing with the man or laughing at him?

However, unlike “De Clerico et Puella”, *Le Dit de la Gageure* does not end with the fulfillment of this female-imagined pleasure. Instead the tale concludes with the reverberating laughter of the insensitive patriarchal voice of the lord of the household. His final words end the debate before the 8-line epilogue:

> E ly sire ly dist en riaunt
> tien tei leres ie te comaunt!
> frapez la bien e vistement
> ie te comaund hardiement
> de lower averez par seint Thomas
> Un cheval q vaudra dis mars!
> Ore dame me diez par amour
> ay ie gayne le wagour?
> e dame vous ne fetez mie qo sage
> de haier ceux qe sunt de mon lynage
> depus qe ie tendrement
> aym les vos entierement
>
> [And the lord said to her laughing
> ‘Hold still, thief, I command you!

Knock her well and quickly,
I command you boldly!
For payment you will have, by St. Thomas
A horse that will be worth ten marks!
Now lady, tell me for love,
Have I won the wager?
And, lady, you do not act at all wisely
To hate those who are of my family,
Since I tenderly
Love those of yours completely.']

He addresses all of the previous speakers in the scene, commanding the violated maid to stop squirming, the young squire to finish his business, and the lady to follow his example in treating members of his family with tenderness and love. But as Dove provocatively asks, "Is it possible to contextualize [misogynist discourse] in a way that does not exclude women, or suppose that laughter was the natural response to these texts?" (345). In other words, do we laugh with the lord at the end of this tale? Or do we laugh at him?

Similarly, critics ask whether Chaucer's fabliaux, and in particular *The Reeve's Tale*, can be read any other way than as unapologetically misogynist due to its depictions of female sexuality and sexual exchange. However, *The Reeve's Tale*, itself a requital of, and thus an alternative discourse to, *The Miller's Tale*, articulates alternative voices and authors to patriarchal authority and sexual control. When the clerks arrive at Symkyn's mill, they vow not to fall prey to his dishonest schemes. But he uses the "clerkes hors" (4060) as a distraction, loosening the reins and releasing the horses to run free "toward the fen, ther wilde mares renne, / And forth with 'wehee,' thurgh thikke and thurgh thenne" (4065-6). With clerks chasing horses and horses chasing mares, the miller is free

to skim his profit from the clerks' grain. The clerks curse their mistake – not restraining the beasts in a barn -- and vow to recapture the horses: "By Goddes herte, he sal nat scape us bathe! / Why ne had thow pit the capul in the lathe?" (4087-8). After finally recovering the horses, the clerks ask for hospitality at the miller's home, and they begin scheming a revenge that involves bed tricks with the miller's wife and daughter, all the while the miller "as an hors he snorteth in his sleep" (4163). And as the horses ran forth with "wehee," so the wife and daughter's desires were satisfied that night. By the morning, Maleyn has lost her flower, and the clerks regain their flour.[26] The daughter weeps when her lover leaves in the morning (4248), and she tells him where to find a cake she made at her father's command from the clerks' stolen meal. The wife crawls back into bed, thinking she is lying with her husband "and lith ful stille, and wolde han caught a sleep," but John "up leep" and "so myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore" (4227-4230). Here Chaucer contrasts stillness and frenetic sexual satisfaction, as the Harley scribe does in "De Clerico et Puella" and *De Chevalier qui fist les Cuns Parler,* and *Le Dit de la Gageure*.

But is it possible to read against the misogynist accusation that women are over-sexed, or enjoy being raped, here, in order to recuperate female desire? If we study consensual sexual relationships in addition to the usual "cuckoldric triangles," and if we acknowledge not just the "masculine economy" and "masculine audience"[27] of

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[26] For further discussion of the flower/flour pun, see Ian Lancashire, "Sexual Innuendo in the 'Reeve's Tale'," *The Chaucer Review* 6.3 (1972): 159-70.

[27] Lochrie, p. 304.

Chaucerian and pre-Chaucerian fabliaux, then we might be surprised to find resistant readers and discourses despite or as a result of clerical representations of women and anti-feminist discourse.[28] As Sidhu provocatively suggests, "by writing a fabliau featuring the betrayal of a daughter, rather than a wife, the Reeve interrogates assumptions about men's right to direct women's desires, a right that the Knight and the Miller uncritically accept" (6). "De Clerico et Puella," *Le Dit de la Gageure* and *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler* all include an unmarried female who articulates her sexual desire freely, in sharp contrast to the traditional cuckoldry plot of Old French fabliau, which revolves around a married woman's illicit affairs. Sidhu's study of female desire in the *Reeve's Tale* "re-examine[s] the assumption that the fabliaux are unreflectively misogynist," suggesting instead that Chaucer "marshal[s] obscene discourse to a more direct critique of aristocratic culture" (19-20). Indeed, the grotesque images of sexual violence and the pornographic images of sexual fulfillment in Chaucerian and pre-Chaucerian fabliaux are not contained by the ecclesiastic context from which these texts originate, but rather they linger and are transformed by the female characters, patrons, readers and hearers of the medieval manuscripts in their domestic contexts.

"Wehee" is for horses

[28] Michael G. Cornelius, for example, finds a critique of the institution of marriage in *The Miller's Tale*, rather than an attack against women. See "Sex and Punishment in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale'," *Human Sexuality*, Eds. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996): 401-26.

In addition to the economic, social and political realities of horse ownership associated with medieval hunting, farming, war, pilgrimage and tournament,[29] the vernacular bestiary provides another context and vital tradition in fourteenth-century England within which to understand the re-occurrence of the horse image in relation to gender and sexuality in Harley 2253. The scribe who copied the Anglo-Norman fabliaux and Middle English lyrics in Harley 2253, in fact, also copied a French bestiaire d'amour into his commonplace book, Harley 273.[30] Significantly, from its inception this vernacular genre was supported by female patrons: "The earliest extant bestiary in the French vernacular was that of the Anglo-Norman poet Philippe de Thaun. He wrote it between 1121 and 1135, and dedicated it to Aelis of Louvain, queen of England."[31] In the late thirteenth century, Richard of Fournival capitalized on the rise of the French metrical bestiary and the decline of Latin prose bestiaries with the composition and circulation of the popular *Bestiaire d'amour*.[32] Taking the Latin prose bestiary from its ecclesiastic, didactic context, the demand of lay audiences and readers seems to have affected the morphosis of the bestiary into a courtly vernacular hybrid, transforming the meaning of the animals voices entirely.

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[29] For a cultural history of the horse in the Middle Ages, see Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999).

[30] George Druce, "The Elephant in Medieval Legend and Art," *Journal of the Royal Archaeological Institute* 76 (1919): 27.

[31] Jeanette Beer, *Beasts of Love: Richard de Fournival's Bestiaire d'amour and a Woman's Response* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003): 10.

[32] Additionally, Debra Hassig finds a "relative scarcity of extant English examples" of the Latin prose bestiary as well. See "Marginal Bestiaries," *Animals and the Symbolic in Mediaeval Art and Literature*, Ed. L.A.J.R. Houwen (Egbert Forsten Groningen, 1997): 185.

Whereas traditional Latin bestiaries begin their encyclopedic exploration of the animal kingdom with the noble, regal savior figure, the lion, Richard's bestiary of love begins with the cock. Because he imagines his book as a plea for his beloved, each animal represents a theme or message related to shunning or attaining his love object. In the bestiary of love, Richard figures the lover as a "cock crowing loudly at midnight, the wild ass braying in the last extremes of hunger" and later, a "thirsty horse drinking water".[33] Thus, rather than the traditional moralizing messages of the Latin bestiaries, each animal entry in the *Bestiaire d'amour* articulates Richard's desire for his lady.[34] And while Richard de Furnival adroitly manipulates the conventions of the popular vernacular romance and courtly literary genres, figuring himself as a desiring lover who offers his book of love to his "bele tres douce amie," the lover's "crowing" and "braying" is not the only voice we hear in four manuscripts of Furnival's *Bestiaire d'amour*.[35] These copies include a woman's response, in which the lady responds to Richard's "Ovidian misogyny" with her own form of gender-specific knowledge: "For although I cannot know all that you know, yet I know something that you do not" (Response 41-42).[36] Thus, Richard de Furnival's Bestiary of Love provides a fruitful context for

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[33] Beer, *Beasts of Love*, 18, 155.

[34] Plato's image of the charioteer who reigns in the passionate horses resonates here. See Plato's *Phaedrus*, "First of all we must make it plain that the ruling power in us men drives a pair of horses, and next that one of these horses is fine and good and of noble stock, and the other the opposite in every way" (51), from *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, Trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1973).

[35] See Beer, *Beasts of Love,* 17, 187 n.1. Manuscripts with the Woman's Response attached include: Paris, BN f.fr. 25566; Paris, BN f.fr. 412; Dijon, Bibliotheque Municipale, 526; Vienna, Osterreichische Nationalbiliothek 2609.

exploring the gendered and sexualized images of the horse in Harley 2253. The horse as a figure of passion, desire, and the untamed Other foregrounds the dialogic nature of desire and voices medieval sexualities in *Le Dit de la Gaguere, Le Chavelier qui fist les cuns Parler,* and "De Clerico et Puella."

As the image of horses would recall to a feudal, agricultural community accustomed to training horses for a variety of specialized tasks and purposes, domesticating a horse and domesticating a wife may have more in common than may appear at first glance. In horse training, Elisabeth LeGuin argues, there is a "dialogic relationship between trainer and trained" (178) in which the participants must negotiate "the recognition of and working with resistance, confusion, or tension" (180).[37] In other words, "it takes two to tango." In training relationships, whether teaching a horse to plow a row, dance a jig, or march into battle, LeGuin locates "a serious attempt to sort out how power and authority actually work in relation to Otherness" (181). Thus, the unbridled horse, the single lady, the passions, and even the body -- according to a "Cartesian model, taking the separation of mind and body to a kind of logical extreme by proposing the body, not as mechanism, but as a morally independent Other" (181) -- are equally poignant images to represent desire that resists confinement. Just as the horse's basic

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[36] Beer pinpoints this Ovidian misogyny as the "ultimate parody" that "woman should, through love's foolishness, have mastery over man in the animal kingdom of love" in "Duel of Bestiaries," *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and Its Legacy*, Eds. Willene B. Clark and Meradith T. McMunn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): 99, 104 n.18.

[37] Elisabeth Le Guin, "Man and Horse in Harmony," *The Culture of The Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World*, Eds. Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 175-96.

response is to flee, so too, Harley 2253 seems to understand, do women want to speak, does passion want to burn and does the body overflow itself. Discipline is required to break a horse, just as silencing is required to stifle the wild and "wicked horse" of female desire.

In fact, once the portal of female voices is opened, the Harley manuscript seems to overflow with depictions of sexual and linguistic abundance. While the protagonist of *De Clerico et Puella* initially responds to the clerk's accusation that he will "walke wod" if she makes his sorrow "lengore laste," moralizing, "the is bettere on fote gon then wicked hors to ryde," she ultimately agrees to satisfy his (and her) "wille." Rather than walking "wod," the lover looks forward, then, to mounting his metaphorical (and perhaps literal) wicked horse, or female object of desire and desiring subject. For the lady, it seems that the sexual activity that springs forth from the tension between being held "so stille" and doing her lover's "wille" subverts her submissive position precisely because of her willing to play the "wicked hors" in the bedroom. In "De Clerico et Puella" the will of the lover and of the beloved become conflated, as the maiden accedes to her suitor's desires and fulfills her own simultaneously. Similarly, in *Le Dit de La Gageure,* the fulfillment of physical love between the squire and the chambermaid is symbolized in the exchange of the "cheval" (horse), a token of passion, sexuality, strength and vitality. Finally, the speaking part of the mare's vagina in *Du chevalier qui fist les cons parler* is evidence of the proliferation of female voices in the Harley manuscript. The bewitched mare's vagina, "daun coun," betrays its rider when a knight on the path asks its destination: "Sir ie porte a mesoune le prestre a s'amie" (Sir, I carry the priest home to

his mistress).[38] This example best displays the dangerous and wicked nature of female voices which threaten patriarchal mores in the Harley manuscript. Like the "chef mestre" of the "compaigyne" of women, whose speech stands in opposition to the teaching of "prestres" and "freres" in the dramatic text *Gilote et Johane,* the horse's cunt in the fabliau loudly and hastily outs the priest. So while it is certainly a misogynist reduction to equate feminine sexuality with the unruly passions of equine nature, nevertheless the talking mare's vagina in *Du chevalier qui fist les cons parler* is an image of ultimate extension of the female's ability to speak. And as Burns argues, these "female characters might be heard as resisting, speaking against, and dissenting" (195), through the articulations of their desire, "their words play[ing] a crucial role in that dominant structure [that contains them], infiltrating it in ways that can reveal to the attentive feminist reader its fundamental weakness and vulnerability" (206).

Female patronage and performance

Recently scholars have become increasingly interested in women's readership, patronage and writing. For example, McCash outlines women's roles as patrons in the rise of the vernacular and the resulting increase in women's writing in the vernacular. She argues that Wace's presentation of the *Roman de Brut* to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1155 "heralded a new inclusion of women in important literary roles" (45). It is certainly significant that the genre on which she concentrates here is the romance, arguing that the courtly culture from whence this genre arises "widens the intended audience, patronage,

[38] For more on the tradition of talking horses and unruly sexual desire, see Michelle Bolduc, "Fauvel's Wayward Wives", *Medievalia et Humanistica* 32 (2007): 43-62.

and even the *personnages* of its literary texts to include those who are not warriors and clerics. The inclusion of women in a central role becomes the sine qua non of the new literature" (46). So women increasingly supported literary endeavors in the vernacular (such as Henry I's second wife's commission of Philippe de Thaon's French bestiary) just as women increasingly drew on the previously Latin-dominated spiritual realm for their own literary authority (cf. Marie de France, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Christine de Pizan). Clearly, as McCash admits, "it would be an over-simplification to suggest that men were the only recipients or writers of Latin works or that only women were interested in the vernacular" (51), but the fact that women and men of the lower classes were excluded from institutions of education further supports the hypothesis that vernacular literature, and especially "new genres like the romance, the lai, the hagiographical romance, vernacular history, and the vernacular bestiary" were supported by female patronage and demanded by a female readership (55). Additionally, McCash points to "the inclusion of women at many places in [Wace's] text where they are not included in Geoffrey's" to suggest that "women were a significant part of this new audience reading or listening to works in the vernacular" (48).

In addition to the patronage and authorship of vernacular genres such as courtly lyrics and romance, bibliographic research shows that medieval women supported religious works such as "books of hours, saints' lives, and religious treatises" (McCash 20).[39] Finally, patrons very often appear to have been widows "who had gained control

[39] See "The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women: An Overview," *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, Ed. June Hall McCash (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996): 1-49.

of their dower properties" (McCash 7). In Ferrante's study of women's roles in medieval texts, she too finds trends of female patronage and authorship, arguing that particular thematic and narrative patterns emerge in texts written by or for women: "women writers also focus more often than men writers on women, their deeds, their emotions, their strengths, and their needs" (Ferrante 8), while romances composed for women feature "the heroine in a position of power and wealth, who controls the actions by her superior educations and special powers, who has more to give the hero than to receive from him, in magic gifts or land" (Ferrante 135).[40] This is a helpful context within which to interpret the female desire, speech and difference between women in Harley 2253. Certainly questions about the authorship, patronage and readership of this unique manuscript arise when female characters play significant roles in the Anglo-Norman and English performance poems, voicing articulations of resistance to patriarchal authority.

Fein's recent work on the Harley compiler supports a performative context for the manuscript's reception. She terms the Harley scribe a "'producer' – with an evident plan towards recitation, performance, or other practical use (such as preaching or counsel) in a multilingual and social setting" (68).[41] Additionally, she calls for further research into the interpretive effects of this domestic-dramatic setting: "When self-consciously literate

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[40] Joan M. Ferrante, *To The Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[41] Evidence of this plan includes, for example, the lyrics grouped according to metre (#42-43, 64-66), which can be sung to the same tune. Furthermore, she points to the fact that "each of the political texts opens as a minstrel song" in order to support the oral, performative purpose of Harley 2253 (78). See "Compilation and Purpose in MS Harley 2253," *Essays in Manuscript Geography: Vernacular Manuscripts of the English West Midlands from the Conquest to the Sixteenth Century*, Ed. Wendy Scase (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007).

poems, that is, poems composed with stanzaic and alliterative virtuosity, offer monologues from a rustic, discontented, yet aspirant class of poorly educated English folk, [to which I would add an aspirant class of single women and widows], would not such poems call attention to intimate social disparities?" (92). Of course they would. And I agree with Fein's conclusion that the Harley scribe consciously validated women's speech precisely by committing it to writing: "the ephemeral utterance is granted material presence and visual space in a book, where it enters the literate culture of both the speaking narrator and the Harley compiler. Inscription itself becomes fraught with the power it confers to the illiterate speaker, power that he [or she!] might obtain by proxy" (93). Thus, the silenced voices, deliberately excluded from powerful positions of authorship and authority, bubble up in the dramatic performances of the Harley manuscript in which physical bodies are afforded the opportunity to ventriloquize the subversive complaints of women and otherwise culturally impoverished or imprisoned persons.

Revard's paleographical and archival work provides the basis for much of what we know about the hands that touched the Harley manuscript and the places it lived. The scribe's hand is found in many legal documents produced "in and near Ludlow from 1314 to at least 1349" (21). Revard dates Harley 2253 by comparing the manuscript's pages to the scribe's other work in legal charters, as well as in two other extant manuscripts, Royal 12.C.xii and Harley 273. Accordingly, Revard argues, "it must have been copied after 1326 and not completed before 1338-40" (23). Harley 273 appears to have been copied during the years 1314-1329, and Revard describes it as "devotional and instructive" in

scope and tone" (65). Royal 12.C.xii, "the Harley scribe's commonplace book," bears evidence of his changing hand during the years 1316-40 (65). The corpus of writing in the hand of the Harley scribe suggests that he was affiliated with both a prominent bishop's *familia* and with a noble household in the Ludlow area.[42] Harley 273 contains various texts useful for a member of a noble household: "charms against fever, wounds and bleeding" and a "copy of Bishop Grosseteste's *Rules* for the management of a seigniorial household" (68).[43] Additionally, included in Royal 12.C.xii is a booklet that comprises folios 8-16 and contains "a miscellany… collection of mathematical problems, puzzles and cooking recipes (the puzzles in Latin, the recipes in French)" dated ca. 1331-40, i.e. contemporaneous with the scribe's participation in the copying of Harley 2253 (71).

Based on the thematic and dramatic evidence within the manuscript and the geographic and domestic evidence from the scribe's hand in other manuscripts, it seems plausible that Harley 2253 was copied with an audience of a mixed noble household, but particularly, one in which a sexually experienced (and widowed) female was ruling the roost. Surely this was not uncommon during a time period ravaged by war, disease, and famine, which would have left many households with widows during the 1330s-40s in England, Joan Mortimer Talbot being one of a number of possible candidates. She was a wealthy widow with lands in Richard's Castle (24). The geographic proximity to the

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[42] See Daniel Birkholz, "Harley Lyrics and Hereford Clerics: The Implications of Mobility, c. 1300-1351", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 175-230.

[43] These texts appear on folios 81r-85v and 112v, and Revard dates their copying ca. 1317-21; see "Scribe and Provenance" in Fein's *Studies in the Harley Manuscript.*

Ludlow scribe suggests a potential affiliation between the Harley scribe and this wealthy, experienced woman whose household might be interested in hearing and performing just the kind of tales told in the Harley manuscript.[44]

The MS Harley 2253 is a hybrid collection of various genres and languages that explicitly juxtaposes topics as well as opposes genders. Rather than existing solely within a narrative of voyeurism and violence, however, the Harley anthology vents the gendered tensions and power imbalances inherent in the fourteenth-century British society from which the texts arise. The male gaze in the fabliaux, in particular, projects its fear of female desire, voyeuristically and fantastically recuperating it back within the mores (and laughter) of patriarchal society. In the case of *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler*, the knight names the female body, commanding its cul and coun to speak. And in the end of "The Wager," the narrative gaze voyeuristically enjoys the deflowering of the chambermaid while simultaneously satisfying aristocratic desires to maintain power and lineage within noble families. Both *Le Chevalier qui fist Les Cuns Parler* and "The Wager," however, end with the generous support of female patronage as the final assurance of the knight's success in the story. Therefore, the MS Harley 2253 as an artifact in general, as well as the Anglo-Norman fabliaux and Middle English performance-poems contained within it in particular, articulates female voices, erupting through the fissure that exists between the lines of the various genres included in the

[44] Additionally, the Harley scribe copied two legal documents in locations owned by Joan Talbot Mortimer's family (Revard's #37 at Richard's Castle on March 8, 1347 mentions John Talbot, Joan's son; and #31 at Stanton Lacy on March 21, 1341).

collection as well as in the tense zone between genders in England's patriarchal, medieval society.

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